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Extending Orientation: Telephone Contacts by Peer Advisers

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The telephone has been used for delivering a variety of services to college students (Dailey & Jeffress, 1980; Iscoe, Hill, Harmon, & Coffman, 1979; Roach, Reardon, Alexander, & Cloudman, 1983; Rosenbaum & Calhoun, 1977). Because consumers typically initiate the telephone contact themselves, the effectiveness of these programs depends on the extent to which students are aware of the availability of services and of their own needs for assistance.

First-semester freshmen may have the least adequate information about what constitutes a problem and where to go for help on campus. In 1982 the Dean of Students Office at the University of Texas at Austin conducted a pilot study of a telephone contact program in which peer advisers placed telephone calls to first-semester freshmen as a form of continuing orientation. Specifically, the project was designed to find out if the elements of a helping interview could be created in an unsolicited telephone call. Would the call be perceived as beneficial or as an intrusion into the lives of freshmen?

Overview

Four peer advisers placed a total of 247 calls. The students called were identified in a random sample of freshmen that was stratified according to sex and participation in the previous summer's orientation program. The peer advisers had already been trained as orientation advisers, but they were given additional training in interviewing methods and application of communication skills to telephone interaction.

The advisers helped develop a general guide for the calls, including possible areas concerning new students (e.g., academics, finances, adjustment to changing relationships with

family and friends, and use of leisure time). Although the calls were meant to be conversational in tone, advisers were asked to explore these areas of concern and offer information and referral as appropriate. Because the calls were unsolicited peer advisers mailed students postcards in advance, introducing themselves and explaining the purpose of the calls.

Evaluation

Approximately 2 weeks after receiving a telephone call, students were mailed a short questionnaire asking them to evaluate the helpfulness of the call and the effectiveness of the peer adviser. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the students returned evaluations. Of this group, 89% felt at ease with their peer advisers and felt free to ask them questions. In addition, as many as 86% of the students felt free to talk about their concerns and only 12% believed that the call became too personal. It seemed, therefore, that the advisers were able to create a comfortable, non-intrusive tone in the majority of their conversations.

More than half of the students (58%) strongly agreed or agreed that the call was informative. A larger number (68%) reported that the call made the university seem less impersonal, and even more (70%) believed the call was helpful.

Several striking differences appeared between male and female students and between orientation attenders and non-attenders. Generally, women who had attended summer orientation reacted most positively toward the call, followed by women who had not attended orientation, men who had attended orientation, and men who had not attended. Specifically, 94% of the attending women reported that they felt free to talk about their concerns with their peer advisers, compared with 84% of the non-attending women, 72% of the attending men, and only 63% of the non-attending men. Whereas 78% of the attending women strongly agreed or agreed that the call made the university seem less impersonal, only 63% of the non-attending women, 61% of the attending men, and 37% of the non-attending men reacted similarly. The four groups responded most similarly to the helpfulness of the call itself, with over half of each group reporting that the call was helpful.

Conclusion

Based on reactions from both students who received calls and the peer advisers who placed them, the telephone contact project seems to provide an alternative approach for new student orientation. Rather than being perceived as intrusive, the calls seem to provide an effective method not only for delivering information and referrals but also for personalizing a large university environment.

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